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State formation and the evolution of naval strategies in the Melaka Straits, c. 500–1500 CE

Derek Heng

The Strait of Melaka and connected waterways have been critical to, and directly affected, the formation of littoral states, societies and economies in eastern Sumatra, the Riau Islands, the Malay Peninsula, and Singapore. The history and nature of statehood in the region is interrelated to the way in which naval capabilities evolved, but, as argued in this article, perhaps not in the straightforward fashion often assumed. Naval capabilities and strategies evolved in tandem with state policy to adapt to changes in the wider Asian maritime political economy which was dominated at various times by China and India. This article examines the factors that affected maritime policy in the Melaka Straits c. 500 to 1500 CE, and the extent to which these furthered the viability of the mainly Malay port-polities, and in particular the regional hegemonic state of Srivijaya in eastern Sumatra. The study utilises textual records, epigraphic materials, and literature to reconstruct a more nuanced picture of maritime states and naval power in premodern Southeast Asia.

Introduction

Developing along the shores of a critical Southeast Asian shipping and trade route, the coastal, largely Malay, societies flanking the Strait of Melaka and connected marine channels and riparian waterways (henceforth collectively, the 'Melaka Straits') had long relied on the sea and sea-borne power and trade for their survival and prosperity.[1] Over centuries, the establishment and development of each port-polity and its attendant sphere of influence and interstate relations was intricately tied to the evolving maritime environment.

Historians such as O.W. Wolters, Pierre-Yves Manguin, Leonard Andaya and Anthony Milner have argued that maritime / naval strategies were indivisible from ethnicity and society in the Melaka Straits, both qualifying as well as distinguishing the seafarers from their land-based compatriots in these port-polities.[2] Anthony

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1 Bennet Bronson, 'Exchange at the upstream and downstream ends: Notes towards a functional model of the coastal state in Southeast Asia', in *Economic exchange and social interaction in Southeast Asia: Perspectives from prehistory, history and ethnography*, ed. Karl L. Hutterer (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1977), pp. 39–52; John N. Miksic, 'Traditional Sumatran trade', *Bulletin de l'École française d'extrême orient (BEFEO)* 74 (1985): 423–67.

2 O.W. Wolters, *The fall of Srivijaya in Malay history* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1970); Pierre-Yves Manguin, 'Shipshape societies: Boat symbolism and political systems in insular Southeast

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Reid in his study of Southeast Asian navies of the sixteenth century onwards through European sources, and Manguin, through analyses of indigenous sources, have argued that there was continuity between the premodern and modern eras in a geographical and operative environment that remained largely unchanged until at least the eighteenth century.[3]

The underlying assumption has been that successful state formation and regional hegemony in the Straits was directly linked to the extent to which these states were able to partake in the international maritime economy that was funnelled through this body of water. The means by which these littoral states expanded and maintained their spheres of influence was assumed to be through navies which grew correspondingly in size and sophistication.[4] Along with these assumptions are studies demonstrating that the ability of European colonial powers to expand, and connect and administer widely dispersed territories by the nineteenth century, was commensurate to the size and operative range of their navies and merchant marines.[5] Given Braudellian assumptions about an unchanged maritime environment — in this case, the Straits as a centuries-old traversable sea lane — the implication was that the continually evolving navigational knowledge, shipping technology and naval capability of these indigeneous littoral states directly affected the trajectory of regional geopolitics.

However, a survey of the available information from multiple sites and eras on the use of sea power as an active tool of social and state policy in the premodern Straits region reveals that such Braudellian assumptions may be misplaced. To begin with, there is a paucity of data on the topic. Direct references to such activities prior to the second millennium CE are sporadic, with only oblique references to navies being made in disjointed sources. Maritime coercive capabilities are only mentioned in some detail from the late twelfth century onwards, while naval strategies remain largely absent in textual records. Even the material aspects of Southeast Asian navies, given that scholarly attention has hitherto focused solely on the shipbuilding techniques of commercial vessels, are not known until the fifteenth century.[6]

Asia', in *Southeast Asia in the 9th to 14th centuries*, ed. David G. Marr and Anthony C. Milner (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1986), pp. 187–214; Leonard Y. Andaya, *Leaves of the same tree: Trade and ethnicity in the Straits of Melaka* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008); Anthony C. Milner, *The Malays* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008).

3 Anthony Reid, 'The structure of cities in Southeast Asia, 15th to 17th centuries', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies (*henceforth *JSEAS)* 11, 2 (1980): 235–50; Pierres-Yves Manguin, 'The merchant and the king: Political myths of Southeast Asian coastal polities', *Indonesia* 52 (Oct. 1991): 41–54.

4 O.W. Wolters, *Early Indonesian commerce: A study of the origins of Srivijaya* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), pp. 240–2; Pierre-Yves Manguin, 'The vanishing jong: Insular Southeast Asian fleets in trade and war (fifteenth to seventeenth centuries)', in *Southeast Asia in the early modern era: Trade, power and belief*, ed. Anthony Reid (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 197–213; Pierre-Yves Manguin, 'The amorphous nature of coastal polities in insular Southeast Asia: Restricted centres, extended peripheries', *Moussons* 5 (2002): 73–99.

5 Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in world history: Power and the politics of difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), pp. 149–84.

6 Michael W. Charney, *Southeast Asian warfare, 1300–1900* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. 104–30; Michael Flecker, 'The South-China-Sea tradition: The hybrid hulls of South-East Asia', *International Journal of Nautical Archaeology* 36, 1 (2007): 75–90; Jeremy Green, 'Maritime archaeology in Southeast and East Asia', *Antiquity* 64 (1990): 347–63.

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This article sheds light on the evolution and role of armed fleets in diplomacy, state formation and economic development in these premodern port-polities. What was the correlation between state formation and naval capability in the Melaka Straits? How did the evolving international and intraregional context change the way in which indigenous Malay societies and states developed and deployed their navies and naval personnel? The article will seek to answer these questions by reconstructing naval strategies and roles in the Straits region over three distinct periods during the first and early second millennia through a survey of extant Chinese historical records, Indian inscriptions and Malay inscriptions, epigraphy and literature.

Seventh to eleventh centuries: The navy as a tool of state formation and expansion

There is clear evidence of contact and exchange between China and Southeast Asia since the Han period (206 BCE–220 CE), and between the Indian subcontinent and the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra from as early as 500 BCE.[7] Yet the earliest existing records of polities in the Melaka Straits only date to the middle of the first millennium CE.[8] Crucially, despite the growing importance of these port-polities within maritime Asia, no information on their naval capabilities is noted in these sources.

On the contrary, Chinese texts allude to the greater importance of land-warfare capability at this early stage of state formation in the Straits region, and the minor, perhaps negligible, role that sea power played in this process. The *Liang shu* (635 CE), in recording Southeast Asian polities contemporaneous to the Liang dynasty (502–557 CE), notes the importance of the army of the ruler of Gantoli (the precursor of Srivijaya in eastern Sumatra) and Poli, as well as the role that these troops played in intimidating the former's adversaries.[9] There is no mention of naval capabilities at all.

At the same time, disparate missions sent by several Straits polities to China suggest substantial intra-regional competition. While the economic and diplomatic competition vis-à-vis China was resolved in Srivijaya's favour by the mid-seventh century, it took almost half a century before Srivijaya was able to project its power and influence overland in southeast Sumatra. It would be another century before Srivijaya could do so in the Gulf of Siam. Put differently, Srivijaya's success in its interactions with China, which was clearly maritime-based and economic, did not immediately translate to a successful extension of its regional geopolitical boundaries.[10] More importantly, Srivijaya's long distance diplomatic and economic interactions were not commensurate with its naval capabilities.

The earliest record of a Melaka Straits navy comes from a Malay inscription dated to the late seventh century CE. The Kedukan Bukit inscription, dated to 683

7 S. Levi, 'Ptolemee, Le Niddesa et la Brhatkatha', *Études Asiatiques* II (1925): 1–55, 431–2; Wang Gungwu, *The Nanhai trade: Early Chinese trade in the South China Sea* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2003), pp. 15–28.

8 Wolters, *Early Indonesian commerce*, pp. 159–72.

9 Yao Silian, *Liangshu* [History of the Liang] (Taibei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan gongsi, 1984), 54, 16a–17b.

10 Derek Heng, 'Situating Temasik within the larger regional context: Maritime Asia and Malay state formation in the pre-modern era', in *Singapore in global history*, ed. Derek Heng and Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011), pp. 36–7.

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CE and recovered from southwest Sumatra, commemorates the successful military campaigns of Srivijaya, said to be located on the banks of the Musi River in present-day Palembang.[11] In the inscription, the term denoting boat is used in a narrative about the transportation of fighting men to a nearby theatre of conflict. It is important to note that the inscription records that only 312 out of a 20,000-strong company, including 1,312 foot soldiers, went by boat.[12] The overwhelming number of foot soldiers suggests that the navy was used in this instance only as a minor means of logistical support.

Similarly, the distribution and language of the Srivijayan inscriptions in Kota Kapur (Bangka Island), Telaga Batu, Lampung and Pasemah, all dated to the end of the seventh century and highly similar in content,[13] reaffirm the sense that the projection of military power was limited to neighbouring polities that could be reached first and foremost by land, and subsequently subjugated through vows of loyalty and threats of potential misfortune as retribution for rejecting Srivijayan overlordship. The only exception to this is a single line reference to a punitive campaign to Java, noted in the Telaga Batu and Kota Kapur inscriptions. Given that Java was reachable only by sea, one can assume that boats were used to transport troops for the campaign.

It is not until the late eighth century that the next piece of evidence of naval activities becomes available. The 775 CE Ligor inscription, found in the Chaiya region (present-day south Thailand) and which records the founding of Buddhist temples in that area by Srivijaya, suggests that the latter's political influence had extended into the northern Malay Peninsula by that time.[14] An account of the Melaka Straits by Abu Zaid, dated to 916 CE, indicates that Kedah had come under the political influence of Srivijaya by the early tenth century.[15] Together, these suggest a change in regional geopolitics, from that of multiple competing polities with limited spheres of influence to a two-tiered hegemonic system centred on Srivijaya encompassing the Melaka Straits and the southern Gulf of Siam; although this was likely achieved through non-coercive means such as trade, it was possibly accompanied by some form of military action as well. Given the Straits geography, this possible military projection would likely have included a significant maritime element.

In his account, Abu Zaid noted that a Srivijayan account of much earlier provenance narrated how, in response to statements made by the ruler of Khmer that he desired the head of the raja of Srivijaya served to him on a platter:

> He (the ruler of Srivijaya) commanded [the minister] to say nothing about what had passed between them, but, at the same time he gave orders for the preparation of a thousand ships of medium size together with their equipment of war and for furnishing of each with arms and as many warriors as each would hold...the King of Qmar

11 K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, *History of Sri Vijaya* (Madras: University of Madras, 1949), p. 113.
12 *Sriwijaya: History, religion and language of an early Malay polity; Collected studies by George Coedes and Louis Charles Damais*, ed. Pierre-Yves Manguin and Mubin Sheppard, Monograph of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (henceforth MBRAS), no. 20 (Kuala Lumpur: MBRAS, 1992), p. 46.
13 Sastri, *History*, p. 116.
14 Ibid., pp. 120–21.
15 G.R. Tibbetts, *A study of the Arabic texts containing material on Southeast Asia* (Leiden: Brill, 1979), p. 33.

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> (Khmer) had no knowledge of the danger which menaced him until the fleet entered the river which led to his capital, and the warriors disembarked.[16]

The expedition was a success, with the Khmer ruler captured and brought back to Srivijaya, while a new ruler, appointed by the Srivijayan ruler himself, was installed in his place.

The ability to project a substantial fighting force across the Gulf of Siam and up the Mekong River may not necessarily have been an improbable undertaking for Srivijaya. Textual records of the mid-first millennium CE onwards regularly indicate that ships traversing this region had large displacement tonnages. As an example, the early fifth-century text *Account of the eminent monk Fa Xian*,[17] notes that the vessel in which the Buddhist pilgrim Fa Xian travelled on, from the Bay of Bengal to China via the Melaka Straits, carried two hundred passengers and a large quantity of cargo, with a smaller vessel carrying one hundred passengers moored to it.[18] While the origins of these vessels are not stated, it is likely that ships belonging to Straits polities had a comparable capacity, a point noted by Manguin. These vessels would have been tapped for military purposes as well.[19] While the size of Srivijaya's fleet and its role in Khmer politics are clearly debatable, it is important to note that, in this account, Srivijaya's naval capacity had expanded in proportion to the number of land troops fielded in a military expedition, even if the role of the navy remained confined to logistical support.

Records of the accompanying maritime aspects of the military campaigns that most likely paved the way for Srivijaya's expansion are distinctly absent, however. Importantly, there is an absence of corroborating information in the Chinese corpus, despite the significant increase in references to Southeast Asia in such texts through the second half of the first millennium CE, particularly, when coupled with the wealth of information on maritime traffic in the Melaka Straits, such as those contained in the seventh-century *Datang xiyu qiufa gaosengzhuan*. This text provides a vivid account of the vibrant maritime environment in which Chinese Buddhist monks voyaged and sojourned between India, the Melaka Straits and China in pursuit of Buddhist scriptures.[20] In these accounts, the ruler of Srivijaya was noted as possessing sufficiently large numbers of vessels for frequent and intense maritime communications to be maintained. However, vessels were noted to have been used for the transportation of passengers and goods, and denoted solely by the character 'bo' (舶), or large sea-going mercantile ships. No military vessels were noted in the text. Similarly, contemporaneous Indian records are silent on the matter of navies or the military usage of ships by the people or polities of the Melaka Straits.

16 Tibbetts, *Arabic texts*, p. 35.

17 The version of the *Account of the Eminent Monk Fa Xian* (高僧法显传) in this article may be found in the *Taisho Tripitaka*, vol. 51, no. 2085, accessible from the SAT Daizōkyō Text Database, http://21dzk.l.u-tokyo.ac.jp/SAT/index_en.html (last accessed on 13 Apr. 2011).

18 Ibid., vol. 51, no. 2085, 865c (last accessed on 13 Apr. 2011).

19 Pierre-Yves Manguin, 'The Southeast Asian ship: An historical approach', *JSEAS* 11, 2 (1980): 266–76.

20 Wang Bangwei, *Datang xiyu qiu fa gao sengzhuan* [大唐西域求法高僧传 Accounts of the Western travels of eminent monks of the Tang in search of scriptures](Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1988), p. 175.

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Indeed, the first Chinese record of Southeast Asian sea power emerges only in the ninth century. The *Tanghuiyao*, compiled in 961 CE during the Song period, notes that:

> In the eighth month (September) of the fouth year of Yuan-he (809), Zhang Zhou, Governor of Annam, submitted a memorandum, saying that the Governor of Huan-ai State (in modern-day Vietnam) under Kingdom of Huan-wang had been subdued with more than 30,000 killed and 59 captured, including the prince, as well as ordnance, warships and war elephants. And Zhang was commended consequently.[21]

Here, it is instructive to note that the compilers of the *Tanghuiyao* used the characters '*zhan chuan*' (战船), which translates to 'war vessel'. The character '*chuan*' (船), in the context of Chinese classical texts of the first millennium CE, is used frequently as a generic term to denote a maritime vessel, used for general transportation as well as for military purposes, as may be denoted by a relevant adjective. The absence of such terms in all textual information on Melaka Straits polities suggests that the navy was not a permanent aspect of these polities.

This absence may be linked to the nature of Srivijayan hegemony set up in the eighth century. Although initially achieved through military means, this rule has been argued by scholars such as Hermann Kulke to be more akin to a loose confederation of chieftains, each ruling over a separate domain, held together both by a sacred oath invoking loyalty to the Srivijayan rulers, as well as by a patron–client relationship which saw these domains benefit economically from the export of their produce to the international markets and from access to foreign products via Srivijaya's primary port at Palembang.[22] This charter state or galactic polity, as proposed by Victor Lieberman and Stanley Tambiah respectively as models for Southeast Asian empires, appears to have come about and been held together not so much through the use of military coercion, but was based on a web of moral obligations on the one hand and material benefits accrued as the price of submission to the hegemon on the other.[23]

Even as neighbouring powers in maritime Asia, most notably Java during the tenth to fourteenth centuries, and Chola India in the eleventh century, began to develop their navies, Srivijaya's sea power was relatively weak. As a case in point, the *Songshi* and *Wenxian tongkao* note that between 990 and 991, a Srivijayan envoy was unable to return from South China to Palembang due to an ongoing military conflict between Java and Srivijaya. Yet Javanese, Arabs from the Middle East, and South Asians were able to maintain diplomatic and economic exchanges with China during this time. Srivijaya, however, which had sent fourteen missions to

21 Wang Pu, *Tanghuiyao* [Institutional history of the Tang dynasty] (Tokyo: Zhongwen chubanshe, 1978), 98, 1751. Author's translation.

22 Hermann Kulke, '"Kadatuan Srivijaya"— Empire or kraton of Srivijaya? A reassessment of the epigraphical evidence', *BEFEO* 80, 1 (1993): 159–80.

23 Victor Lieberman, *Strange parallels: Southeast Asia in global context, c. 800–1830. Vol. 2. Mainland mirrors: Europe, Japan, China, South Asia, and the islands* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 764; Stanley J. Tambiah, *World conqueror and world renouncer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 102–31.

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China between 960 and 990, was not noted by the Chinese to have dispatched another mission to the Song court in China until 1003.[24]

There are two observations here: first, that clearly, Java's navy was sufficiently strong enough to completely disrupt Srivijaya's communications with China. Second, despite the naval confrontation between Java and Srivijaya, communications between the littoral polities of the Indian Ocean and China continued unabated during this time, suggesting that the conflict did not necessarily occur in the open seas, but was more likely confined to the estuary and river in the vicinity of Srivijaya's capital at Palembang, the mouth of the Musi River and the Bangka Straits.

Srivijaya's response to Java's aggression appears to have been defensive. In his entry on Srivijaya, Zhao Rugua notes in the *Zhufanzhi* (c.1225): 'In the past, [this state] used an iron chain as a barrier to prepare against other robbing parties (arriving on vessels?). There were opportunities to release (i.e. draw) it by hand. If merchant ships arrive, it has to be released'.[25] The use of such booms as one of the key aspects of Srivijaya's maritime defence suggests that the maritime threats that Srivijaya, and Melaka Straits polities in general, had to face prior to the late tenth century were fairly limited.

The inability of Melaka Straits polities to respond to maritime threats becomes particularly evident in the early eleventh century. Between 1017 and 1025, the Cholas raided the key Malay ports in the Straits and the Gulf of Siam, including Kedah, Melayu (Jambi), Lambri, Srivijaya and Langkasuka, pillaging the Kedah treasury and capturing Srivijaya's ruler.[26] The Tanjore inscriptions are at present the only sources for these raids, and may possibly exaggerate the success of the raids themselves (see below). Nonetheless, the campaign's brevity, coupled with its successful paving of the way for the extension of Chola influence and the influx of Tamil commercial interests into the northern Melaka Straits over the next century, is further indication of Straits polities' inability to defend themselves from naval attacks.

A number of scholars have argued that the Chola raids had a fundamental impact on the nature of Malay political culture and economy in the Straits region through the course of the eleventh century. According to Jan Wisseman Christie, the contents of the Tamil inscriptions recovered from Kedah and Lobu Tua (north Sumatra), dated to 1070 and 1088 respectively, suggest that Chola influence had extended into the northern end of the Melaka Straits by the second half of the eleventh century.[27] Scholars have looked upon this evidence as indicative of Srivijaya's receding regional political influence.

24 *Songshi* [History of the Song dynasty 宋史], ed. Tuo Tuo et al., 489, 14089; Wang Yunwu, *Ma Duanlin: Wenxian tongkao* [馬端臨: 文獻通考 Encyclopaedia of literary contributions] (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1936), 332, 2610, 2. Also, see Derek Heng, *Sino–Malay trade and diplomacy from the tenth through the fourteenth century* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2009), p. 81.

25 Chen Jiarong and Qian Jiang, *Zhufanzhi zhubu* [諸蕃志注補 Treatise on the Foreign Barbarians] (Hongkong: Hongkong University Press, 2000), p. 47. Author's translation.

26 Noboru Karashima and Y. Subbarayalu, 'Ancient and medieval Tamil and Sanskrit inscriptions relating to Southeast Asia and China', in *Nagapattinam to Suvarnadwipa: Reflections on the Chola naval expeditions to Southeast Asia*, ed. Hermann Kulke, K. Kesavapany and Vijay Sakhuja (Singapore: ISEAS, 2010), pp. 279, 280.

27 Jan Wisseman Christie, 'The medieval Tamil-language inscriptions in Southeast Asia and China', *JSEAS* 29, 2 (1998): 257–8; Sastri, *History* pp. 132–3.

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Yet, it is noteworthy that the *Songshi* records that in 1028, only three years after the apparent destruction wrought in the Straits, Srivijaya dispatched a rich mission to China.[28] Furthermore, a 1079 inscription in Guangzhou records that Srivijayan commercial vessels had been arriving at Guangzhou annually between 1064 and 1077.[29] There is therefore a clear disjuncture, or an absence of a relationship between Srivijaya's military and maritime economic capabilities. This is in direct contrast to the conclusions of such scholars as Wolters, who have argued that Srivijaya's political and economic influence over the Melaka Straits and Gulf of Siam would have necessarily been maintained by a strong naval presence.[30] Instead, it appears that the navies were either not a factor in the political economy of the region, or that they developed along a different trajectory from the maritime economy.

If this is the case, what factors account for this divergence in economic and naval strategy in the Straits region prior to the twelfth century? Up until the late eleventh century, foreign traders brought products to Chinese ports, while the Chinese by and large, due to various prohibitions, did not engage in maritime trade.[31] Hence the key economic strategy in the Straits was to secure and monopolise the transshipment of products to China. A sufficiently powerful port-polity would benefit from becoming the region's funnel for this trade and ensuring that the other ports in the area would relinquish engaging in the China trade directly. In the late seventh to eleventh centuries, Srivijaya appears to have become a commercial hub in the Straits.

The same objective and means appears to also have been applied to interactions with India. In this case, however, the sustained activities of the South Indians, both through the Tamil trade guilds as well as through direct political intervention, prevented the Melaka Straits polities from establishing a similar state of affairs at the northern end of the Melaka Straits, with the exception of a brief interlude between the ninth and early tenth centuries, when the political transition from Pallava to Chola rule in South India enabled Srivijaya to extend its influence into Kedah.[32]

This state of affairs would explain the ad hoc nature of naval mobilisation during the first millennium CE, and the near absence of reports of naval activities by the many foreign travellers traversing the region. There was no need for a constant naval presence in the region, given that the nexus of economic exchange occurred beyond the region itself, and the control of international shipping and the flow of trade goods were therefore not critical to the well-being of the regional hegemonic polity.

The implications of this tentative conclusion are fairly significant. Melaka Straits polities have often been regarded as maritime in nature. However, given the discussion above,[33] the reality may have been that up until the eleventh century, at least

28 Heng, *Sino-Malay*, pp. 86–7.

29 For differing interpretations of the historical implications of the Guangzhou inscription, refer to Heng, *Sino-Malay*, pp. 88–91; and Tan Yeok Seong, 'The Sri Vijayan inscription of Canton (A.D. 1079)', *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 5, 2 (1964): 17–26.

30 Wolters, *Early Indonesian commerce*, p. 241.

31 Jitsuzo Kuwabara, 'On P'u Shou-Keng', *Memoirs of the Research Department of the Toyo Bunko* 2 (1928): 1–79.

32 Derek Heng, 'Situating Temasik within the larger regional context', pp. 39–40.

33 See, for example, Kenneth R. Hall, *A history of early Southeast Asia: Maritime trade and societal development, 100–1500* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011); Andaya, *Leaves of the same tree*, pp. 49–81.

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in terms of their military outlook, such polities may have operated, and may therefore be regarded, as land-based in nature. It is only with the changes in the international context from the eleventh century onwards, initially characterised by the Chola raids, and subsequently by the increasing presence of Chinese traders directly operating in Southeast Asian waters, coupled with the emergence of new powers on the periphery of the Straits, that the role and nature of the navy began to change.

Twelfth and thirteenth centuries: The navy as a proactive tool of economic policy

After the Chola raids, there is no information on naval issues in the Melaka Straits until the dramatically different account in the *Lingwai daida* (1178), written by Zhou Qufei:

> This state (Srivijaya) has no products, but the people are well practised in warfare. When they apply medication on their body, they cannot be harmed. In offensive naval warfare, their attacks are unsurpassed. Hence, the neighbouring states are aligned to it. If foreign ships passing through the vicinity do not call at this state, [vessels] are dispatched to teach them a lesson and to kill. Hence, this state is wealthy, with rhinoceros horns, elephant [tusks] (ivory), pearls, aromatics and medicines.[34]

Similar information concerning Srivijaya is also recorded in the *Zhufanzhi* (c. 1225), which notes:

> All are excellent in maritime and land warfare (水陆战). At any time that a mobilisation order is established, chieftains [are the ones who] command [the troops]. All of them prepare and equip [themselves] with soldiers, equipment and food. Arriving at the enemy, they dare to die (i.e. are not afraid of dying). [Hence it is regarded as] the elder of the various states (i.e. first amongst equals)…This state is at the middle of the sea, controlling the choke-point through which the various foreign vessels (舟车) come and go. In the past, [it] used an iron chain as a barrier…This year (i.e. presently), it is not taut (i.e. not extended) and not used, [lying in a] pile in the water…If merchant ships (舶) cross [the vicinity] and do not enter [i.e. call at the port], then ships (船) are dispatched to do battle [with them]. They have to die (i.e. the persons onboard the merchant ships have to be killed). Hence, this state (Srivijaya) is a great spoke of vessels (舟).[35]

This information is likely a reference to both maritime and riverine warfare that would have characterised intra-state conflicts in this environment, particularly given the extensive navigability of the Musi and Batang Hari rivers along which the key Srivijayan centres — Palembang and Jambi — were located. More importantly, these accounts indicate that both the nature of the Srivijayan navy, as well as the role it played in the viability of the polity itself, had, by the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, become markedly different.

34 Tu Youxiang, *Zhou Qufei: Lingwai daida* [嶺外代答 Answers from beyond the Southern Mountains] (Shanghai: Yuandong chubanshe, 1996), p. 42. Author's translation.
35 Chen and Qian, *Zhufanzhi zhubu*, pp. 46–7. Author's translation.

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To begin with, the navy was clearly no longer simply a logistical tool mobilised only when needed. The inclusion of naval information in the *Lingwai daidai* and *Zhufanzhi*, whose authors most likely obtained their information from Chinese traders and sailors regularly operating in Southeast Asian waters, suggests not only that Srivijaya's fleet had developed warfare capabilities, but also that it had become a constant and visible fixture of the maritime landscape. The ability to successfully coerce mercantile shipping to call at Srivijaya's port suggests the need to mobilise and maintain constant presence at critical points in the Straits of Melaka and the East Java Sea, as opposed to being present only along the Musi and Batang Hari.

The *Zhufanzhi* also suggests that the Srivijayan navy was becoming institutionalised and professionalised, with a coherent framework that included a command structure, a mobilisation sequence, and a rationalised equipping and supply scheme. In contrast to earlier accounts such as those in the *Liangshu*, *Nanqishu* and *Nanshi*, which mention only land troops in reference to royal escorts in the Melaka Straits region, by the early thirteenth century, the Srivijayan ruler was noted to 'come and go riding in a vessel'.[36] While the use of water transport is not unexpected, the royal vessel was noted in *Zhufanzhi* along with observations of the ruler's clothing and the regalia accompanying the ruler's procession, including the type of parasol used and ceremonial weapons of the royal guards. Taken together with the highly structured and organised nature of naval mobilisation, it would appear that the navy was beginning to become an important visual element of statecraft in the Melaka Straits.

The navy had also become an economic tool, and was used to bolster Srivijaya's position as an important port-of-call in the Straits. Previous translations have rendered the entries in the *Lingwai daida* and *Zhufanzhi* as indicating that military vessels were dispatched to force mercantile vessels that were travelling through the vicinity to call at its port, and that Srivijaya was implementing a naval strategy that would enable its port to develop into a shipping hub.[37] However, a closer reading indicates that the navy was employed as a tool to deprive rival ports of any trade it could not garner.

This new naval strategy and economic policy appears to have had precedence in the early twelfth century. According to the *Pingzhou ketan* by Zhu Yu (c. 1116), Srivijaya had recently monopolised the trade in sandalwood incense, for which the major market was China.[38] The supply of *Santalum album*, a variety of sandalwood used for incense found in East Java, the Lesser Sunda Islands and Timor, appears to have been under Javanese control during this time, and traded to China under its auspices. Instead, Srivijaya's monopoly of sandalwood incense appears to have been confined to supplies of another variety — the *Pterocarpus santalinus* — which was

36 Chen and Qian, *Zhufanzhi zhubu*, p. 46.

37 Freidrich Hirth and W.W. Rockhill, *Chau Ju-Kua: His work on the Chinese and Arab trade in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, entitled Chu-fan-chi* (New York: Paragon, 1966), pp. 62–3.

38 Zhu Yu, *Pingzhou ketan* [萍州可談 Conversation from the South] (Taibei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan gongsi, 1984), 2: 5a & b. Derek Heng, 'Shipping, customs procedures and the foreign community: The *Pingzhou ketan* on three aspects of Guangzhou's maritime economy in the late eleventh century AD', *Journal of Song Yuan Studies* 38 (2008): 11–12. So Kee Long, 'Dissolving hegemony or changing trade pattern?', *JSEAS* 29, 2 (1998): 299.

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obtainable primarily from the southern Indian subcontinent and the Malay Peninsula.[39] It may be the trade in the latter variety, for which the Chinese were beginning to have an increasing appetite as a construction material,[40] that Srivijaya was applying its naval belligerence to. Here, a hybrid policy, marrying Srivijaya's historic role as a transshipper of foreign products to China, with the more recent development of Chinese traders coming to Southeast Asia to procure products directly for the Chinese market, resulted in the formulating of a naval strategy that saw Srivijaya monopolising the flow of an important commodity through the Straits region.

By the second half of the twelfth century, this strategy was expanded to include rhinoceros horns, elephant tusks, pearls, aromatics and medicines.[41] The sources of these products, at least for the East Asian market, included Chola South India, the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra, the Indonesian Archipelago and mainland Southeast Asia.[42] The *Lingwai daida*'s account indicates that the Javanese and Arabs appear to have continued their mercantile interactions with China unhindered during this time, suggesting that Srivijaya may have been directing its navy to target ships from the Melaka Straits, the West Java Sea and possibly the Gulf of Siam in pursuit of these products.

By the early thirteenth century, the products that Srivijaya could garner through this strategy had changed again. The range of Southeast Asian products made available increased substantially, suggesting that Srivijaya's trade had shifted towards supplying these products as its economic mainstay. These included incense made of lakawood, gharuwood, and sandalwood; as well as camphor, cardamom, cloves and coral.[43] The ports from which these products were made available to the Chinese, juxtaposed against their natural distribution, provide us with an interesting economic map of Southeast Asia in the early thirteenth century. Apart from the ports in the Gulf of Siam, Srivijaya was the only insular Southeast Asian source of gharuwood available to the Chinese during this time.[44] And although cardamom and cloves were produced only in the Eastern Indonesian Archipelago during this period, Srivijaya managed to be an alternative source of these products in competition with Java and its dependencies. Camphor from Borneo, the northeast Malay Peninsula and Barus in northwest Sumatra, was available from the Peninsular ports of Tambralingga and Langkasuka, both of which were beyond Srivijaya's influence.[45] Coral and lakawood incense, both of which were abundantly available throughout Southeast Asia, were made available to Chinese traders from all the ports along the Melaka Straits, indicating that these were not likely to have been products Srivijaya

39 Wheatley, 'Geographical notes': 65; I.H. Burkill, *A dictionary of the economic products of the Malay Peninsula* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 1986–90.

40 For more details on the Chinese trade in sandalwood, see Derek Thiam Soon Heng, 'The trade in lakawood products between South China and the Malay world from the twelfth to fifteenth centuries AD', *JSEAS* 32, 2 (2001): 133–49.

41 Tu, *Zhou*, p. 42.

42 Paul Wheatley, 'Geographical notes on some commodities involved in Sung maritime trade', *JMBRAS* 32, 2 (1959): 5–140.

43 Chen and Qian, *Zhufanzhi*, pp. 46–7.

44 Ibid., pp. 344–57.

45 Ibid., pp. 46–7, 66, 71.

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was keen to monopolise.[46] Similarly, sandalwood incense was available from Java and its dependencies in the Eastern Indonesian Archipelago, and Kuala Beranang on the northeast coast of the Malay Peninsula, where Srivijaya's influence would end by 1230.[47] The vibrancy and diffused nature of this trade can also be seen through the archaeological record of both shipwreck excavations as well as land-settlement sites in the Melaka Straits region.[48]

Taken together, the information from the *Pingzhou ketan*, *Lingwai daida* and *Zhufanzhi* help us chart Srivijaya's naval and economic strategies over the course of approximately one hundred years. One way of interpreting the changes over time is through the lens of the navy's geographical reach. Whereas Srivijaya's navy appears to have covered the Melaka Straits and west Java Sea during the early twelfth century, within the next fifty years or so, this range had possibly extended to include the Gulf of Siam. By the early thirteenth century, however, the area of effectiveness receded from the Java Sea and the Gulf of Siam, and appears to have been confined primarily to the southern half of the Straits and possibly certain northern reaches of the Straits. The extent of this naval capability in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries appears to be corroborated by information in the *Dade nanhaizhi* by Chen Dazhen (c. 1307). In the entry on foreign polities, Srivijaya is noted to be in charge of the small western ocean, with the area encompassed by ports along the Melaka Straits, all the way to Sri Lanka (i.e. the Bay of Bengal), while Tambralingga was in charge of the same maritime realm, but in the area encompassing the ports of the Gulf of Siam. Java was noted to be in charge of the Java Sea and East Indonesian Archipelagic region.[49] These may not have been spheres of influence, but possibly respective maritime spheres of operation, within which the navies of Srivijaya, Tambralingga and Java were the most effective and pervasive.[50]

If we were to accept this proposition, then the capabilities of the Melaka Straits navies, as represented by the case of Srivijaya, would have had to undergo substantial vacillations that required significant commitment of economic resources to have such

46 Ibid., pp. 368, 411.

47 Ibid., p. 358. For information on the contraction of Srivijaya's sphere of influence in the northeast Malay Peninsula and the Gulf of Siam, see O.W. Wolters, 'Tambralingga', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 21, 3 (1958): 587–607.

48 E. Edwards McKinnon, 'Kota Cina: Its context and meaning in the trade of Southeast Asia in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries' (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, Ithaca, 1984); John N. Miksic, *Archaeological research on the 'Forbidden Hill' of Singapore: Excavations at Fort Canning* (Singapore: National Heritage Board, 1985); S.J. Allen, *Trade, transportation and tributaries: Exchange, agriculture and settlement distribution in early historic-period Kedah, Malaysia* (Michigan: U.M.I. Dissertation Information System, 1988); Pierre-Yves Manguin, 'Palembang and Srivijaya: An early Malay harbour-city rediscovered', *JMBRAS* 66, 1 (1993): 23–46; *Archaeological recovery of the Java Sea wreck*, ed. M. Flecker and William M. Mathers (Maryland: Pacific Sea Resources, 1997); Claude Guillot, *Histoire de Barus, Sumatra: le site de Lobu Tua* (Paris: Association Archipel, 1998); Abu Ridho and W. Edwards McKinnon, *The Pulau Buaya wreck: Finds from the Song period* (Jakarta: Ceramics Society of Indonesia, 1998); Michael Flecker, *The archaeological recovery of the 10th century Intan shipwreck* (Ph.D. diss., National University of Singapore, 2001).

49 Chen Dazhen, *Dade nanhaizhi* [大德南海志 Treatise on the South Seas in the Dade era] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju bianjiaobu 1990), 7: 19a–20b.

50 For a detailed discussion of similar naval operations by Oman within established maritime spheres of influence in the Western Indian Ocean, refer to Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Portuguese empire in Asia, 1500–1700: A political and economic history* (London: Longman Press, 1993), p. 192.

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a strategic trajectory. However, it would seem impossible for naval vessels to be accosting merchant ships at such distant locations from Srivijaya's port of Palembang as Kedah, not least because the port-polities of the northern end of the Straits were becoming increasingly autonomous by the early thirteenth century. In other words, the sphere of influence as noted in the *Dade nanhaizhi*, and by extension the effectiveness of the navy, may not have been premised on its geographical range, but rather its targeting strategy.

For instance, vessels of specific origins may have been identified as they entered the Srivijayan navy's effective area of operation, most likely in the vicinity of the key port; when they sailed past the port and did not call there, the navy would then be sent in pursuit of the recalcitrant traders. Ocean-going vessels, denoted by the character '*bo*' (舶) and used in Chinese texts to denote foreign mercantile vessels of substantive size, would have been a likely target of this strategy, although native vessels would have most certainly been included as well.

The results of this strategy, at least by the early thirteenth century, would have reflected a shift in the way in which Melaka Straits polities functioned within the context of the larger maritime Asian economy. The emphasis of the Straits region ports had gradually shifted, from the twelfth century onwards, towards an intra-regional focus. The Chinese maritime community was apparently aware of this shift. Information in the *Zhufanzhi* suggests that Srivijaya had become primarily a hub of local shipping from the Melaka Straits. This is reflected by the use of the character '*zhou*' (舟) in denoting the type of vessels that congregated at its port,[51] possibly in reference to the smaller indigenous vessels operating in what J.C. van Leur and H.D. Evers have termed the peddling trade within the Straits.[52]

This economic shift and accompanying adjustments in naval strategy appear to have continued well into the mid-fourteenth century. The *Daoyi zhilue* by Wang Dayuan (c. 1340s) notes in the entry on Longyamen (Keppel Straits) that the inhabitants of the settlement, a satellite of the polity of Temasik (Singapore), would sail out to attack ships sailing through the southern entrance to the Melaka Straits, either en route to the Java Sea or the South China Sea.[53] Similar practices in the northern Straits were noted by Ibn Battuta, who observed that vessels were often assembled at Kedah in preparation for raids. These texts indicate that the targeting of merchant ships was limited to vessels coming in from sectors of the maritime Asian economy that Melaka Straits polities would not otherwise have had easy access, such as vessels carrying products from the Indian Ocean littoral in the case of polities located at the southern Melaka Straits, and vessels from the South China Sea and Java Sea in the case of polities located at the northern end of the Straits.

While it remains debatable as to whether such actions amounted to a coherent naval policy, what is clear is that this strategy shifted, over time, from being one that affected the political economy of the Melaka Straits region as a whole, to one

51 Chen and Qian, *Zhufanzhi*, pp. 47.

52 H.-D. Evers, 'Traditional trading networks in Southeast Asia', *Archipel* 35 (1988): 89–100; J.C. van Leur, *Indonesian trade and society: Essays in Asian social and economic history* (The Hague: W. Van Hoeve, 1955).

53 Su Jiqing, *Daoyi zhilue jiaoshi* [*島夷志略校釋* Treatise on the Barbarian Isles], (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), p. 213.

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whose effects were confined to the multiple small maritime areas of operation of these disparate navies. Indeed, the fourteenth-century accounts attest to the fact that the operative spheres of Melaka Straits navies had shrunk dramatically by the mid-fourteenth century, and used for the purpose of 'garnering' products, rather than to broker and maintain a regional economic structure.

One of the major changes affecting the port polities was that, through a series of regulations instituted by the Song court (960–1278), the Chinese became increasingly engaged in maritime trade. Restrictions on sailing abroad to trade were gradually lifted, and by 1090, Chinese ships were permitted to sail from any point along the Chinese coast, and to remain abroad for up to nine months.[54] Consequently, Chinese traders became active in Southeast Asia, gathering greater knowledge about the region and its products and directly procuring these items. The result was that Southeast Asia's role was no longer primarily that of a transshipper of highly prized exotic items, but as a source of such products, both obtainable from the region and further afield.[55] The initial goal of monopolising the supply of sought-after goods was transformed into a strategy of reducing the number of competing ports in the Straits region.

The ships that Melaka Straits navies could target appear to have been dependent on the geopolitics of maritime Asia. Up until the early twelfth century, the Cholas maintained diplomatic and economic relations with China while exerting significant political influence in the northern Straits, as reflected in the Tamil inscriptions at Lobu Tua and Kedah. This influence would have been enforced by at least some naval capabilities on the part of the Cholas. The impression provided by the *Pingzhou ketan* was that Srivijaya's monopoly over the trade in sandalwood by the early twelfth century was confined to supplies from the Malay Peninsula, Sumatra and the west Java Sea littoral, given the puissance of the Cholas and Java's rise during this time. By the second half of the twelfth century, the Chola's withdrawal from the northern Melaka Straits due to domestic political upheavals appears to have enabled Srivijaya to target South Indian vessels and to dominate the supply of subcontinental export products such as gharuwood, rhinoceros horns, and ivory to Chinese traders in the Melaka Straits.

At the same time, the twelfth century witnessed the beginning of the decline of Srivijaya within maritime Southeast Asia and in the eyes of its foreign partners. Kedah fell outside of Srivijayan influence through the eleventh century. By the beginning of the thirteenth century, Pahang, Kuala Beranang and Kompei had established direct economic links with the Chinese port of Quanzhou.[56] Jambi became independent of Srivijayan influence by the early thirteenth century, while Ligor fell under the influence of Tambralingga by the 1230s.[57] After the sack of Srivijaya in 1275 by Majapahit forces, a plethora of Malay port-polities emerged in the Straits, each attempting to

54 Xu Song et al., *Songhuiyao jigao* [宋會要輯稿 Veritable records of the Song dynasty], (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1957), *zhiguan* [職官 official governance]: 44: 8a, b. Also refer to Heng, *Sino–Malay trade and diplomacy*, pp. 48–52.

55 Derek Heng, 'Structures, networks and commercial practices of private Chinese maritime traders in island Southeast Asia in the early second millennium AD', *International Journal of Maritime History* 20, 2 (2008): 41–8.

56 Zhao Yanwei, *Yunlu manchao* [云麓漫钞 Writings from the clouds and foothills], 1206, 5: 88.

57 Chen and Qian, *Zhufanzhi*, p. 78.

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engage directly with foreign traders, with varying degrees of success. The trajectory of indigenous naval strategies was therefore in inverse proportion to the political and economic influence exercised by the hegemonic polity of the Straits region. The development of increasingly proactive naval strategies was therefore not only a reaction to the changing nature of interactions with major trading partners such as China and India, but also as a result of the Srivijaya's declining power.

Late thirteenth to fifteenth centuries: The navy as a tool for the construction of the ideal polity

The picture painted above indicates that political disintegration, coupled with the ascendance of such regional powers as Sukothai in Thailand and Majapahit Java at the Straits region's periphery by the late thirteenth century, created a state of affairs that should not have predisposed the development of consolidated naval forces amongst the Melaka Straits polities. Indeed, the regularity at which the Sukhothai and Javanese navies traversed the region to impose political submission on the Straits polities, and the accompanying exaction of tribute, would have stymied any efforts at regional political consolidation by the Straits polities. Interestingly, it is at this critical juncture that the indigenous Malay historical annals or *hikayats*, whose historical narratives begin in the late thirteenth century, reveal a number of critical departures from the strategies employed in the preceding two centuries. The *Sejarah Melayu* and the *Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai* stand out as important sources in this regard.

To begin with, Malay rulers began to view Java as the model of the ideal imperial polity, and the navy as one of the most important tools for the establishment of the ideal political order. From the *Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai's* idealisation of Majapahit,[58] three critical aspects of the port-polity that could be furthered through the use of the navy are apparent — the establishment of a regional economy and the garnering of international trade and products; the maintenance of a regional sphere of influence; and the development of a cosmopolitan urban centre and population. This vision was not only premised on the navy as a symbol of the means by which these ideals of a polity could be achieved, but also on the actual use of the navy to engender and enforce regional hegemonic ideals. The examples of both Majapahit Java and Sukothai are instructive. The *Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai* notes, for example, that Sukothai used its navy as a punitive force to extract tribute from northern Malay port-polities.[59] This information is corroborated by the *Daoyi zhilue*, which notes that Sukothai used its fleet to attack weaker coastal polities, deploying fleets numbering up to a hundred vessels for such purposes.[60] The polities targeted by Sukhothai even included Temasik at the southern end of the Malay Peninsula.[61] Similarly, the *Sejarah Melayu* notes that Majapahit Java dispatched two naval expeditions against Temasik, of which the second expedition eventually led to the port-polity's capitulation.[62] Finally, the *Nagarakertagama* by Mpu Prapanca (c. 1365), records that the

58 A.H. Hill, 'Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai', *JMBRAS* 33, 2 (1961): 160–61.
59 Hill, 'Hikayat': 127–8.
60 Su, *Daoyi*, p. 154.
61 Ibid., p. 213.
62 C.C. Brown, *Sejarah Melayu or Malay Annals* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 41–2.

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polities that sought Majapahit's protection including those located in the southern Melaka Straits, parts of Kalimantan and the Moluccas and Sunda islands.[63] The navy was therefore a tool of imperialism, and a visual manifestation of the power of the hegemonic polity.

It is in this context that significant changes in the way Melaka Straits polities utilised their navies may be noted. Firstly, the navy began to be used as a means of showcasing and posturing their relative diplomatic and economic status vis-à-vis the other rival or allied polities. The *Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai* records that the Sultan of Perlak, in offering the hand of his daughter in marriage to the ruler of Pasai, ordered an escort comprising a fleet of a hundred vessels be readied to escort the princess to her bridegroom's city.[64] Similarly, the ruler of Pasai dispatched an emissary with a navy to receive the ruler of Tamiang who was arriving for an official visit.[65] In the same vein, the *Sejarah Melayu* relates the story of Sri Tri Buana, a raja of Palembang who left the city to eventually found the port-polity of Temasik, leading a fleet of countless vessels when his flotilla was intercepted by the Queen of Bentan's chief minister, who was himself heading a fleet of four hundred vessels.[66]

While it is not known if these incidents, and the information on the fleets involved, are historically accurate, what is clear from the narratives is that the size of the fleet that a ruler dispatched became a means of idealising its relative status. This was reflective of a culture that was becoming increasingly imbued with ritual ceremony as well as visual representations of relative social status.[67] The number of vessels in the fleet that a ruler dispatched for such diplomatic interactions appears to have been a key aspect of the language and posture of diplomatic discourse. This appears to have been particularly important at a time when no Straits polity was able to establish much effective superiority over its neighbours.

This development also had important implications for Malay society. The manner of presentation at court of the heads of military and administrative units of a Straits polity became critical to the articulation of their membership and belonging within its body-politic.[68] The extent to which a representative was close to the ruler in the context of the royal court assembly, the ceremonial functions he was

63 *Desawarnana (Nagarakertagama) by Mpu Pranpanca*, trans. Stuart Robson (Leiden: KITLV, 1995), p. 3.

64 Hill, 'Hikayat': 122.

65 Ibid.: 132.

66 In C.C. Brown's translation, Brown denotes the quantitative noun as 'sails'. This is not apparent from the transliterated version of the MS No. 18 of the Raffles collection, on which Brown's translation is based. In other words, the size of the vessels of the Queen of Bentan is not apparent, even though the number of vessels is clear. Brown, *Sejarah Melayu*, p. 18; R.O. Winstedt, 'The Malay Annals or Sejarah Melayu; the earliest recension from MS. no. 18 of the Raffles collection, in the Library of the Royal Asiatic Society, London', *JMBRAS* 16, 3 (1938): 59.

67 For examples of such socio-political displays, see Brown, *Sejarah Melayu*, pp. 21, 44–9; Anthony C. Milner, *The Malay raja: A study of Malay political culture in east Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula in the early nineteenth century* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1977), pp. 74–5; J.M. Gullick, *Indigenous political systems of western Malaya* (London: Athlone, 1958), pp. 44–61, 65–94.

68 Derek Heng, 'Socio-political structure, membership and mobility in the pre-modern Malay coastal port-polity: The case of Singapore in the fourteenth century', in *Migration and membership regimes in global and historical perspective*, ed. Ulbe Bosma, Gijs Kessler and Leo Lucassen (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

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responsible for in the symbol-laden political ritual of the royal processions, and the hereditary nature of these positions, were important means by which heirarchy, degree of membership and belonging were articulated in the Straits body-politic.

It is in this socio-political context that the position of admiral, or 'Laksamana' in Malay, first appears in the *Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai* during the reign of Maliku'l-Mahmud (d. 1326),[69] suggesting that by the early fourteenth century, the commander of the navy was a position that was first invested in the northern Malay court. The institutionalisation of the naval commander in court heirarchy was an important departure from earlier practice. The fourteenth century appears to have been the critical turning point where the navy moved from being merely a tool for economic management and survival, to having an increasingly important sociocultural role. A similar institutionalisation of the head of the navy was also occurring during this time in the southern Melaka Straits. According to the *Sejarah Melayu*, the commander of the Temasik navy was conferred the title 'Maha', meaning 'Great', by the ruler of Temasik.[70] A critical difference, however, was that while the naval commander was regularly summoned to appear at the royal court to receive instructions and to head diplomatic missions on the ruler's behalf, he did not have a permanent place in the court, nor was he accorded the title of 'Laksamana'.

Despite the symbolic elevation of naval leaders, in emulation of the major international and interregional powers, there was no corresponding enhancement in the naval capabilities of the indigenous Straits polities. Instead, the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries continued to be characterised by a general absence of maritime security.[71] A defensive maritime posture similar to that adopted by the region's ports during the late first millennium CE was also adopted. Temasik, for example, installed a boom across its harbour at the mouth of the Singapore River, presumably to prevent unwelcome vessels from entering into the polity's main settlement area.[72]

By the fifteenth century, however, this state of affairs had begun to change. In 1368, the Ming dynasty came into power in China, and the second Ming emperor, Yong Le, initiated a series of naval voyages led by the admiral Zheng He, which saw China projecting its military, political and economic might into maritime Asia. The voyages, which ended by 1433, altered the geopolitics of the Melaka Straits, enabling one polity in the region to emerge as the key regional representative under the aegis of the Ming tributary system.[73] In 1405, Melaka, a nascent port-polity in the Straits, was able to attain recognition from the Ming court for that role.[74] This in turn enabled the port-polity to build up its capabilities to a sufficiently high level to fend off the aggressive advances of Sukothai and Majapahit Java by the mid-fourteenth century, and to establish itself as the regional port-of-call, catering to both the Chinese market, and Maritime Southeast Asian (including Javanese) and Indian merchants. At the same time, it managed to establish its political influence

69 Hill, 'Hikayat': 127.
70 Brown, *Sejarah Melayu*, p. 38.
71 Tibbetts, *Arabic texts*, pp. 59, 64–5.
72 Brown, *Sejarah Melayu*, p. 26.
73 Geoff Wade, 'The Zheng He voyages: A reassessment', Asia Research Institute (ARI) Working Paper Series no. 31, ARI, National University of Singapore, 2004.
74 Wang Gungwu, 'The first three rulers of Melaka', *JMBRAS* 61, 1 (1968): Table II.

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over a substantial part of the Melaka Straits during the first three decades of its existence. By the time the Ming voyages were terminated in the 1430s, Melaka had become sufficiently stable and economically viable as a port-polity to enable it to maintain its primacy in the Straits region on its own.

It is in this context that the ascendancy of the navy to a paramount position in Malay statecraft occurs. The first recorded naval battles by a Straits navy occurred during the reign of Sultan Muzaffar Shah (r. 1445–59) of Melaka. These battles, occurring after the cessation of the Ming voyages, included the routing of an approaching Siamese fleet by one of the sons of the Laksamana of Melaka, and the successful repelling of a fleet from Makassar by the Melakan navy.[75] Major political outcomes between polities in the Straits region, as well as with those outside of the region, were increasingly being determined through naval warfare from the mid-fifteenth century onwards.

Along with the records of the increasing use of the navy to determine geopolitical outcomes in the region is the development of a vocabulary pertaining to naval warfare that begins to appear in the historical texts. Differentiations between generic terms for ships and a more specific taxonomy for military craft begin to emerge in the Malay texts about the mid-fifteenth century onwards. While the collective noun used for ships was 'sails' through the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, vessels specific to naval warfare, in particular, the three-masted cruiser (*lancaran tiang tiga*) that became the backbone of Melaka Straits naval power[76] begin to appear in local accounts by the mid-fifteenth century.[77] Manguin and Flecker have calculated that the 'jong' were between thirty and forty metres long.[78] In addition, the ordnance used in naval battles also began to appear in records, including arrows and darts.[79] The tactics used during naval combat included the ramming of ships, as well as the use of grappling hooks to draw enemy ships broadside.[80] Developments in naval warfare appear to have been an extension of the primary land-warfare tactics that were employed in the Straits region up until that time.[81]

As a sign that the navy was becoming one of the most important features of Malay socio-political life, the naval commander of Melaka was conferred the title 'Laksamana'. The position was instituted as a hereditary one, and was second only to the position of the Bendahara (Prime Minister), with the ethnic group serving in the navy — the Orang Laut — incorporated as part of the social fold.[82] The Laksamana was recognised by the polities that maintained relations with Melaka as

75 Brown, *Sejarah Melayu*, pp. 60, 91.

76 Pierre-Yves Manguin, 'Lancaran, ghurab and ghali: Mediterranean impact on war vessels in early modern Southeast Asia', in *Anthony Reid and the study of the Southeast Asian past*, ed. Geoff Wade and Li Tana (Singapore: ISEAS, 2012), pp. 146–82; the design of the *lancaran* was likely to have been influenced by Middle Eastern ships.

77 Brown, *Sejarah Melayu*, p. 60; Winstedt, 'Malay Annals': 98.

78 Manguin, 'The vanishing jong'; Flecker, 'The South-China-Sea tradition'; Nik Hassan Suhaimi B. Nik Adb. Rahman and Samsol Sahar, 'Malaysian report', paper presented at the ASEAN-COCI symposium on maritime and waterways, Terengganu, Malaysia, 23–28 Jan. 2006, p. 68.

79 Brown, *Sejarah Melayu*, p. 91; Winstedt, 'Malay Annals': 98.

80 Brown, *Sejarah Melayu*, p. 91.

81 Michael W. Charney, *Southeast Asian warfare, 1300–1900, vol. 1* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), p. 126.

82 Brown, *Sejarah Melayu*, p. 55.

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the war-chief of the sultan of Melaka.[83] Additionally, Muhammad Haji Salleh has argued, from a literary point of view, that personalities who had been historical naval commanders of the fifteenth century, such as Hang Tuah of the Melakan navy, later became eulogised in Malay court traditions by the late seventeenth century, attesting to the prominence of such individuals in the collective memory of the southern Straits' coastal populations.[84]

Melaka was not the only polity to undergo these naval developments. The *Sejarah Melayu* notes that by the mid-fifteenth century Pasai had also developed sufficient capabilities to repel contending fleets from both within and outside the Straits region,[85] even though there is no detail on the types of vessels or ordnance used. By the late sixteenth century other emergent polities, including Indragiri, Aceh, Pahang and Aru were also beginning to possess substantial naval capabilities, indicating that this trend was occurring all across the Melaka Straits. As Manguin has argued, the fleets of these polities were made ready for bellicose circumstances as and when they emerged,[86] making the navy the tool of first choice in any act of state that required the use of force.

The navy was used, in the fifteenth century, primarily for the defence of the port-polity and its outlying territories and dependent polities, and against recalcitrant polities within and outside of the region that sought to destabilise the political status quo. Manguin has argued that Aceh's naval capability in the mid-sixteenth century was still limited to fleets of modest numbers of smaller vessels.[87] It was only in the early seventeenth century, in the face of growing emphases on military power to implement the cash cropping of pepper in conquered lands, that the navy began to be used as a tool to engineer changes in the regional status quo. This is most notably reflected by the naval campaigns of the Johor Sultanate and Aceh against each other's strategic positions and port-settlements, and by their collaborative efforts with the newly arrived European powers to accost Luso and Dutch shipping around the Straits of Singapore.[88] In addition, no technological advancements were evident during this period. It is only with the arrival of the Portuguese and Dutch in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that Melaka Straits naval warfare tactics took on a different trajectory, during which time long-standing indigenous tactics were coupled with European gunnery technology and maritime warfare strategies. Together with the growing emphasis on the military to implement cash cropping in conquered lands,[89] this resulted in the development of naval capabilities that were to be on par with those of the Europeans until the late eighteenth century.

83 Ibid., p. 70.
84 Muhammad Haji Salleh, 'A white knight speaks the white man's tongue: Notes on translating the *Hikayat Hang Tuah*', *Indonesia and the Malay World* 34, 100 (2006): 295–405.
85 Brown, *Sejarah Melayu*, p. 91.
86 Manguin, 'Jong', p. 206.
87 Ibid.
88 Kwa Chong Guan, Derek Heng and Tan Tai Yong, *Singapore: A seven-hundred year history* (Singapore: National Archives of Singapore, 2009), pp. 63–82.
89 Charney, *Southeast Asian warfare,* pp. 104–30; Manguin, 'Jong', pp. 197–213.

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Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that despite their geographical setting, it should not be assumed that the primary means by which littoral states in the Straits projected their power were inherently maritime in nature, or that naval policies were deliberate and proactive formulations that spurred state formation. Nor should the navy be assumed to have always been an intrinsic and unchanging social institution of premodern Melaka Straits societies. Instead, they were often reactions to the broader economic and political landscape of maritime Asia.

Prior to the twelfth century, naval strategies appear to have been ad hoc, and fleets were raised to facilitate the projection of land-based military power often by providing logistical support. In this regard, the naval capabilities of the coastal polities was secondary to their land warfare capabilities. Rather than being maritime powers, as has hitherto been argued by several scholars, these polities should therefore be regarded as largely land-based powers.

It was only in response to a transformation in the maritime Asian economy, from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries, that the Straits navies began to be developed into proactive tools of intra-regional economic competition. Threatened by the loss of its competitive advantage and the growing power and independence of port-polities over which it had overlordship, Srivijaya developed a naval strategy to delay its decline. This strategy was not only externally orientated, but also economically punitive. As the entire Straits region's economic decline continued through the fourteenth century, the permanence and centrality of the navy continued to be reinforced, even as naval action degenerated into raiding ships.

The ability of powers located in the Straits region's periphery (Sukothai, Majapahit) to exercise significant influence over littoral states through naval means during the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries introduced a new dimension to the role of the navy. Innovative uses of naval capabilities in diplomatic discourse began to be adopted by Melaka Straits polities, which in turn led to fundamental changes in the nature of Malay society — the co-opting of naval personnel into the sociopolitical heirarchy. These developments culminated, by the fifteenth century, in the navy becoming an integral part of the Melaka Straits body-politic.

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